

THOMAS COLE'S  
ESSAY ON AMERICAN SCENERY  
ESSAY CONTEST 2018

FEATURING WINNING SUBMISSIONS FROM:

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THOMAS COLE NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

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**T**oday, you can stand anywhere in Thomas Cole's 1815 home in Catskill, New York, and hear his tribute to the American landscape echoing through the rooms; "I have found no natural scenery that has affected me so powerfully as that which I have seen in the wilderness of America," alongside his fears for it; "I cannot help but express my sorrow that the beauty of such landscapes is quickly passing away." Our recent re-interpretation of the artist's home through the installation of "The Parlors" allows visitors to see Thomas Cole's paintings and hear his celebration of the American landscape in his own words.

Many of the words that guests hear in the house were taken from a lecture that Cole gave in 1835 centered primarily on the beauty of American wilderness, but perhaps more importantly, expressing concern over how quickly that beauty was being erased by industry. It was later published in 1836 under the title, *Essay on American Scenery*, through which it reached a much broader audience. At the time of his writing, the Industrial Revolution was in full force and nowhere was it more observable than in Catskill, New York, where Cole had made his home. The newly arrived railroad cut scars in the valley Cole looked out on every day. Acres of trees were cut down daily to provide for local industry, while factories and mills began to populate the banks of the once wild Catskill Creek.

Cole's essay is ever relevant to our current moment; there is still so much about the American landscape that is joyful, beautiful, but also terrifying and rapidly changing. It seems that Cole felt simultaneously a resignation to these changes and a fierce desire to fight against them. Who among us can't relate? With this in mind, we launched the 2018 Essay on American Scenery Contest and asked writers to respond to the prompt: *How is the American landscape changing? Is there something you see, do, or experience that you hope will be around for future generations?*

We hoped that writers, through poetry or prose, might react to and engage the range of experiences and emotions Cole expressed, and they did, brilliantly. The responses were varied and beautiful, and both specific and broad, just like Cole's. Over one hundred and fifty years after Cole's writing, contemporary writers still celebrated the beauty of the Catskills and Hudson Valley. They wrote about feeling a sense of peace in the natural world and a devotion to preserving it. They wrote also about new terrors that Cole never confronted but which are rapidly changing the American landscape: school shootings, climate change, the opioid epidemic. Submissions were read by a panel of judges with wide ranging expertise in art history, writing, curation, and environmental conservation. The panel generously gave their time, carefully reviewing dozens of submissions, and each chose their three favorites. From this process, our essay contest winners emerged.

It is a privilege of every historical institution to work to be relevant in the current historical moment, and we have been immensely lucky to have such talented writers aid us in this effort: Sandra Dutton, Jennifer Kabat, Stephanie

Sara Pruiksma. From dozens of entries, these writers and poets stood out to our esteemed panel of readers, to whom we are very grateful: J. Jeffrey Anzevino, Land Use Advocacy Director, Scenic Hudson; Kathy Greenwood, Director, Art & Culture Program, Albany International Airport; W. Douglas McCombs, Chief Curator, Albany Institute of History and Art; Kate Menconeri, Curator, Thomas Cole National Historic Site; Nancy Siegel, Professor of Art History, Towson University; Allan Wallach, Ralph H. Wark Professor of Art and Art History and Professor of American Studies Emeritus, Professorial Lecturer in Art History, George Washington University.

We are also indebted to the Albany Airport Art & Culture Program who adopted this project and created from it the exhibition *Landmark* which will celebrate Thomas Cole and this new writing, and bring to the conversation work by nine contemporary artists. Finally, thank you to all of the writers who shared their writing, bringing to life Cole's ideas at a moment when it is most needed.

—Madeline Conley, 2017-2018 Cole Fellow and *Essay on American Scenery* Contest Organizer

# ESSAYS

# Essay on American Scenery

## by Thomas Cole

Originally “Lecture on American Scenery” by Thomas Cole delivered before the Catskill Lyceum at the new Baptist Church, April 1, 1841 (edited version)

The essay that with your indulgence I shall now offer is a mere sketch of an almost exhaustless subject—American Scenery; and in selecting the theme the author has placed more confidence in its overflowing richness than in his own capacity for treating it in a manner worthy of its vastness and importance.

It is a subject that to every American ought to be of surpassing interest; for whether he beholds the Hudson mingling its waters with the Atlantic, explores the central wilds of this vast continent, or stands on the margin of the distant Pacific, he is still in the midst of American scenery—it is his own land; its beauty, its magnificence, its sublimity, all are his; and how undeserving of such a birthright if he can turn towards it an unobserving eye, an unaffected heart!

Before entering into the proposed subject, in which I shall treat more particularly of the scenery of the northern and eastern states, I shall be excused for saying a few words on the advantages of cultivating a taste for scenery and for exclaiming against the apathy with which the beauties of external nature are regarded by the great mass, even of our refined community. It is generally admitted that the liberal arts tend to soften our manners; but they do more—they carry within them the power to mend our hearts. Poetry and painting sublime and purify thought, and rural nature is full of the same quickening spirit; it is in fact the exhaustless mine from which the poet and painter have brought such wondrous treasures—an unfailing fountain of intellectual enjoyment where all may drink and be awakened to a deeper feeling of the works of genius, a keener perception of the beauty of our existence, and a more profound reverence for the Creator of all things.

It would seem unnecessary to those who can see and feel for me to expatiate on the loveliness of verdant fields, the sublimity of lofty mountains, or the varied magnificence of the sky; but that the number of those who seek enjoyment in such sources is comparatively small. From the indifference with which the multitude regard the beauties of nature, it might be inferred that she had been unnecessarily lavish in adorning this world for beings who take no pleasure in its adornment, who, in grovelling pursuits, forget their glorious heritage. Why was the earth made so beautiful, or the sun so clad in glory at his rising and setting, when all might be unrobed of beauty without affecting the insensate multitude, so they can be “lighted to their purposes?”

He who looks on nature with a "loving eye" cannot move from his dwelling without the salutation of beauty; even in the city, the deep blue sky and the drifting clouds appeal to him. And if to escape its turmoil; if only to obtain a free horizon, in the mere play of light and shadow over land and water, he finds delight; but let him be transported to those favored regions, where the features of the earth are more varied, or yet add the sunset, that wreath of glory bound around the world, and he indeed drinks pleasure from a purer cup than avarice or ambition have the power to give. The delight, such a man experiences, is not merely sensual, or selfish, that passes with the occasion and leaves no trace behind; but in gazing on the pure creations of the Almighty, he feels a calm religious tone steal through his mind, and when he has turned to mingle with his fellow-men, the chords which have been struck in that sweet communion cease not to vibrate.

In this age, when a meagre utilitarianism seems ready to absorb every feeling and sentiment, and what is called improvement, in its march, makes us fear that the bright and tender flowers of the imagination will be crushed beneath its iron tramp, it would be well to cultivate the oasis that yet remains to us, and to cherish the impressions that nature is ever ready to give, as an antidote to the sordid tendencies of modern civilization. The spirit of our society is to contrive and not to enjoy--toiling to produce more toil--accumulating in order to aggrandize.

The pursuits and pleasures of taste, among which the love of scenery holds a conspicuous place, will serve to temper the harshness of such a state, and like the atmosphere that softens the most rugged forms of landscape, cast a veil of tender beauty over the asperities of life. Did our limits permit, I would endeavor more fully to show how necessary to the complete appreciation of the fine arts is the study of scenery, and how conducive to our happiness and well-being is that study and those arts; but I must now proceed to the proposed subject of this essay--American Scenery.

There are those who, through ignorance or prejudice, strive to maintain that American scenery possesses little that is interesting or truly beautiful; that it is rude without picturesqueness, and monotonous without sublimity; that being destitute of the vestiges of antiquity, which so strongly affect the mind, it may not be compared with European scenery. But from whom do these opinions come? from those who have read of Grecian mountains and Italian skies, and never troubled themselves to look at their own? from those travelled ones whose eyes were never opened to the beauties of nature until they beheld foreign lands, and when those lands faded from the sight, were again closed forever? disdaining to destroy their transatlantic impressions by the observation of the unfamed and less fashionable American scenery? Let such persons shut themselves up in their narrow shell of prejudice. I hope they are few, and that the community, increasing in intelligence, will know better how to appreciate the treasures of their own country.

I am by no means desirous of lessening in your estimation the glorious scenes of the old world; that ground which has been the great theatre of human events; those mountains, woods and streams, made sacred in our minds by heroic deeds and immortal song; over which time and genius have suspended an imperishable halo. No! But I would have it remembered that nature has shed over this land beauty and magnificence, and although the character of its scenery may differ from the old world's, yet inferiority must not therefore be inferred; for though American scenery is destitute of many of those circumstances that give value to the European, still it has features, and noble ones, unknown to Europe. A very few generations have passed away since this vast tract of the American continent, now the United States, rested in the shadow of primeval forests, whose gloom was peopled by savage beasts and scarcely less savage men; or lay in those wide, grassy plains called the prairies—

“The gardens of the desert these,  
The unshorn fields, boundless and beautiful.”

And though an enlightened and increasing people have broken in upon the solitude, and with activity and power wrought changes that seem magical, yet the most distinctive, and perhaps, the most impressive, characteristic of American scenery is its wildness.

It is the most distinctive, because in Europe the primitive features of scenery have long since been destroyed or modified--the extensive forests that once overshadowed a great part of it have been felled; rugged mountains have been smoothed, and impetuous rivers turned from their course to accommodate the tastes and necessities of a dense population; the once tangled wood is now a grassy lawn; the turbulent brook a navigable stream; crags that could not be removed have been crowned with towers, and the rudest valleys tamed by the plough.

And to this cultivated state our western world is fast approaching; but nature is still predominant, and there are those who regret that with the improvements of cultivation the sublimity of the wilderness should pass away; for those scenes of solitude from which the hand of nature has never been lifted, affect the mind with more deep-toned emotion than aught which the hand of man has touched. Amid them the consequent associations are of God, the Creator; they are his undefiled works, and the mind is cast into the contemplation of eternal things. As mountains are the most conspicuous objects in landscape, they will take the precedence in which I may say on the elements of American scenery.

It is true that in the eastern part of this continent there are no mountains that vie in altitude with the snow-covered Alps; that the Alleghanies and the Catskills are not higher than four or five thousand feet; but this is no inconsiderable



height. Ben-Nevis in Scotland and Snowdon in Wales are not more lofty; and in New-Hampshire the White Mountains; in our own state the Adirondacks almost pierce the region of eternal snow. The Alleghanies are in general heavy in form; but the Catskills, though not broken and serrated like the most picturesque mountains of Italy, have varied, undulating, and exceedingly beautiful outlines; they heave from the valley of the Hudson like the subsiding billows of the ocean after a storm.

American mountains are generally clothed to the summit by dense forests, while those of Europe are mostly bare, or merely tinted by grass and heath. It may be that the mountains of Europe are on this account more picturesque in form, and there is a grandeur in their nakedness; but in the gorgeous garb of the American mountains there is more than an equivalent; and when the woods "have put their glory on," as an American poet has beautifully said, the purple heath and yellow furze of Europe's mountains are in comparison but as the faint secondary rainbow to the primal one.

But in the Adirondacks of this state and the White Mountains of New-Hampshire, there is a union of the picturesque, the sublime, and the magnificent; there the bare peaks of granite, broken and desolate, cradle the clouds; while the valleys and broad bases of the mountains rest under the shadow of noble and varied forests; and the traveller who passes the Sandwich range on his way to the White Mountains, of which it is a spur, cannot but acknowledge, that although in some regions of the world nature has wrought on a more stupendous scale, yet she has nowhere so completely married together grandeur and loveliness; there he sees the sublime melting into the beautiful, the savage tempered by the magnificent.

I will now speak of another component of scenery, without which every landscape is defective--it is water. Like the eye in the human countenance, it is a most expressive feature: in the unrippled lake, which mirrors all surrounding objects, we have the expression of tranquillity and peace--in the rapid stream--the headlong cataract, that of turbulence and impetuosity. In this great element of scenery what land is so rich? I would not speak of the great lakes, which are, in fact, inland seas--possessing some of the attributes of the ocean without its sublimity; but of the lesser lakes, such as Lake George, Champlain, Winnipisiogee, Otsego, Seneca, and a hundred others, that stud like gems the bosom of this country. There is one delightful quality in nearly all these lakes--the purity and transparency of the water. In speaking of scenery, it might seem unnecessary to mention this; but independent of the pleasure that we have in beholding pure water, it is a circumstance which contributes greatly to the beauty of landscape; for the reflections of surrounding objects, trees, mountains and sky, are the most perfect in the purest water.

I would rather persuade you to visit the "Holy Lake," the beautiful Horican,

than describe its scenery--to behold you rambling on its storied shores, where its southern expanse is spread, begemmed with isles of emerald, and curtained by green receding hills--or to see you gliding over its bosom, where the steep and rugged mountains approach from either side, shadowing with black precipices the innumerable islets, some of which bearing a solitary tree, others a group of two or three, or a "goodly company," seem to have been sprinkled over the smiling deep in nature's frolic hour. These scenes are classic. History and genius have hallowed them. War's shrill clarion once waked the echoes from these now silent hills, and the pen of a living master has portrayed them in the pages of romance.

The Hudson has its sources in numerous lakes; these, with some that give birth to other rivers, are cradled amid the granite precipices of the Adirondack mountains, and smile like children of beauty, amid scenes of savage grandeur; and the day is not far distant when the poet, the artist, all the lovers of nature in her mightiest moods will seek them for inspiration and delight.

Though differing from Lake George, Winnipisiogee resembles it in its numerous islands. Its mountains do not stoop to the water's edge, but through varied screens of forest, may be softened by the blue mountains; on the other the dark Ossipees, while above and far beyond, rear the "cloud capt" peaks of the Sandwich and White Mountains.

I will not fatigue you with a vain attempt to describe more particularly the lakes that I have named; but would say that the small lakes, which are so numerous in this state, New-Hampshire, and Maine, in character are truly and peculiarly American. I know nothing in Europe which they resemble. The miniature lakes of Albano and Nemi in Italy, and the small and exceedingly picturesque lakes of Great Britain, may be compared in size, but are dissimilar in almost every other respect. Embosomed in the primitive forest and sometimes overshadowed by huge mountains, they are the chosen places of tranquillity; and when the deer issues from the surrounding woods to slake his thirst in the cool waters, he beholds his own image as in a polished mirror; the flight of the eagle can be seen in the lower sky; and if a leaf falls, the circling undulations chase each other to the shores unvexed by contending tides.

There are two lakes of this description, situated in a wild mountain gorge called the Franconia Notch, in New-Hampshire; they lie within a few hundred feet of each other, but are remarkable as having no communication, one being the source of the wild Amonoosuck, the other of the Pemigewasset. Shut in by stupendous mountains, which rest on crags that tower more than a thousand feet above the water, whose rugged brows and shadowy breaks are clothed by dark and tangled woods, they have such an aspect of deep seclusion, of utter and unbroken solitude, that lonely traveller, when standing on their brink, is overwhelmed with an emotion of the sublime. It is not that the jagged precipices

are lofty; that the encircling woods are of the dimmest shade; or that the waters are profoundly deep; but that where earthquake and convulsion once struggled together in their agony, and rent these granite precipices; over rocks, woods and waters brooded the deep spirit of repose, and the silent energy, nature, stirs the soul of its inmost depths.

There are times when these lakes take a far different expression—when the tempest is abroad; but in scenes like these, the richest chords are those struck by the gentler hand of nature.

And now I must turn to another of the beautifiers of the earth--the waterfall, which, in the same object at once presents to the mind the beautiful, but apparently incongruous idea of fixedness and motion--a single existence in which we perceive unceasing change and everlasting duration. The waterfall may be called the voice of the landscape; for unlike the rocks and woods which utter sounds as the passive instruments, played on by the winds, the waterfall strikes its own chords, and rocks, and mountains re-echo its rich harmony. And this is a land abounding in cataracts; have we not Kaaterskill, Trenton, the Flume Nunda, Genesee, stupendous Niagara, and a hundred others named and nameless ones, whose exceeding beauty must be acknowledged by all who behold them? In the Katterskill we have a stream, diminutive indeed, but throwing itself headlong over a precipice into a deep gorge of densely wooded mountains, and possessing a singular feature in the vast arched cavern, that extends beneath and behind the cataract. At Trenton, there is a chain of waterfalls of remarkable beauty, where the foaming waters, shut in by steep cliffs, break over rocks of architectural formation, and tangled and picturesque trees mantle abrupt precipices, which it would be easy to imagine crumbling and “time disporting towers.” At Nunda, the Genesee precipitates itself in several cascades beneath precipices, some of which are seven hundred feet in perpendicular height. And Niagara! that wonder of the world! where the sublime and beautiful are bound together by an inseparable chain. In gazing at it we feel as though a great void had been filled in our minds; our conceptions expand; we become a part of what we behold! At our feet the floods of a thousand seas. In its volume we conceive immensity--in its course, everlasting duration; in its impetuosity, uncontrollable power. These are the elements of its sublimity. Its beauty is garlanded around in the varied hues of the water, in the spray that ascends the sky, and in that unrivalled bow which forms a complete cincture round the unresting floods.

The river scenery of the United States is a rich and boundless theme. The Hudson for natural magnificence, is unsurpassed. What can be more beautiful than the lake-like expanses of Tapaan and Haverstraw as seen from the rich orchards of the surrounding hills? What can be more imposing than the precipitous Highlands, whose dark foundations have been rent to make a passage for the mighty river? And ascending still, where can be found scenes more enchanting? The lofty Catskills stand afar off; the green hills gently rising from the flood, recede like steps, by which we may ascend to a great temple, whose pillars are those everlasting hills, and whose

dome is the blue boundless vault of heaven. The Rhine has its castled crags, its vine-clad hills, and ancient villages; the Hudson has its wooded mountains, its rugged precipices, its green undulating shores, and an unbounded capacity for improvement by art. Its shores are not besprinkled with venerated ruins, or the palaces of princes; but there are flourishing towns and neat villas, and the hand of taste has already been at work. Without any great stretch of the imagination, we may anticipate the time when the ample waters will reflect temple and town and dome in every variety of picturesqueness and magnificence.

In the Connecticut, we behold a river that differs widely from the Hudson. Its sources are amid the wild mountains of New-Hampshire; but it soon breaks into a luxuriant valley, and flows for more than a hundred miles, sometimes beneath the shadow of wooded hills, and sometimes glancing through the green expanse of elm-besprinkled meadows. Whether we see it at Haverhill, Northampton or Hartford, it still possesses that gentle aspect; and the imagination can scarcely conceive Arcadian vales more lovely or more peaceful than the valley of the Connecticut.

Nor ought the Ohio, the Potomac, the Susquehannah, with their tributaries, be forgotten in the rich list of the American rivers. They are a glorious brotherhood; but volumes would be insufficient for a description.

In the Forest scenery of the United States we have that which occupies a vast space, and is not the least remarkable; being primitive, it differs widely from the European. In the American forest we find trees in every stage of growth and decay--the slender sapling rises in the shadow of the lofty tree, and the giant in his prime stands by the hoary patriarch of the wood--on the ground lie prostrate decaying ranks that once moved their verdant heads in the sun and wind. These are circumstances productive of great variety and picturesqueness. Green umbrageous masses; lofty and scathed trunks; contorted branches thrust athwart the sky; the mouldering dead below, shrouded in moss of every hue and texture, form richer combinations than can be found in the trimmed and planted wood. Trees are like men, differing widely in character; in sheltered spots, or under the influence of culture, they show few contrasting points; peculiarities are pruned and trained away until there is a general resemblance. But in exposed situations, wild and uncultivated, battling with the elements and with one another for the possession of a morsel of soil, or a favoring rock to which they may cling--they exhibit striking peculiarities, and sometimes original grandeur.

For variety, the American forest is unrivalled; in some districts are found oaks, elms, birches, beeches, planes, hemlocks, and many other kinds of trees commingled, clothing the hills with every tint of green, and every variety of light and shade. There is a peculiarity observable in some mountainous districts, where trees of a genus band together; there often may be seen a mountain whose foot is clothed with deciduous trees, while on its brow is a sable crown of pines; and sometimes belts of

dark green encircle a mountain horizontally; or are stretched in well defined lines from the summit to the base. The nature of the soil, or the courses of rivulets, are the causes of this variety, and it is a beautiful instance of the exhaustlessness of nature; often where we should expect unvarying monotony, we behold a charming diversity. Time will not permit me to speak of American trees individually; but I must notice the elm, that paragon of beauty and shade; the maple, with its rainbow hues; and the hemlock, the sublime of trees, which rises from the gloom of the forest like a dark and ivy-mantled tower.

There is one season when the American forest surpasses all the world in gorgeousness—that is the autumnal; then every hill and dale is riant in the luxury of color; every hue is there, from the liveliest green to deepest purple, from the most golden yellow to the intensest crimson. The artist looks despairingly on the glowing landscape, and in the old world his truest imitations of the American forest, at this season, are called falsely bright, and scenes in Fairy Land. The sky will next demand our attention. The soul of all scenery, in it are the fountains of light and shade and color. Whatever expression the sky takes, the features of the landscape are affected in unison, whether it be the serenity of the summer's blue, or the dark tumult of the storm. It is the sky that makes the earth so lovely at sunrise, and so splendid at sunset. In the one it breathes over the earth the crystal-like ether, in the other the liquid gold. The climate of a great part of the United States is subject to great vicissitudes, and we complain; but nature offers a compensation. These very vicissitudes are the abundant sources of beauty—as we have the temperature of every clime, so have we the skies—we have the blue unsearchable depths of the northern sky—we have the upheaped thunder-clouds of the torrid zone; we have the silver haze of England, and the golden atmosphere of Italy. And if he who has travelled and observed the skies of other climes, will spend a few months on the banks of the Hudson, he must be constrained to acknowledge that for variety and magnificence, American skies are unsurpassed. Italian skies have been lauded by every tongue and sung by every poet, and who will deny their wonderful beauty? At sunset the serene arch is filled with alchymy that transmutes mountains, and streams, and temples into living gold. But the American summer never passes without many sunsets that might vie with the Italian, and many still more gorgeous, that seem peculiar to this clime. Look at the heavens when the thunder shower has passed, and the sun stoops behind the western mountains—then the low purple clouds hang in festoons around the steps—in the higher heaven are crimson bands interwoven with feathers of gold, fit for the wings of angels; and still above is spread that interminable field of ether, whose color is too beautiful to have a name.

It is not in the summer only that American skies are beautiful, for the winter evening often comes robed in purple and gold, and in the westering sun the iced groves glitter as beneath a shower of diamonds—and through the twilight heaven innumerable stars shine with a purer light than summer ever knows.

I will now venture a few remarks on what has been considered a grand defect in American scenery—the want of associations, such as arise amid the scenes of the old world. We have many spots as umbrageous as Vallombrosa, and as picturesque as the solitudes of Vaucluse; but Milton and Petrarch have not hallowed them by their footsteps and immortal verse. He who stands on Mont Albano and looks down on ancient Rome has his mind peopled with the gigantic associations of the storied past; but he who stands on the mounds of the west, the most venerable remains of American antiquity, may experience the emotion of the sublime, but it is the sublimity of a shoreless ocean unislanded by the recorded deeds of man.

Yet American scenes are not destitute of historical and legendary associations; the great struggle for freedom has sanctified many a spot, and many a mountain stream and rock has its legend, worthy of poet's pen or painter's pencil.

But American associations are not so much of the past as of the present and the future. Seated on a pleasant knoll, look down into the bosom of that secluded valley, begirt with wooded hills, through those enamelled meadows and wide waving fields of grain—a silver stream winds lingeringly along—here seeking the green shade of trees—there glancing in the sunshine; on its banks are rural dwellings shaded by elms and garlanded by flowers; from yonder dark mass of foliage the village spire beams like a star. You see no ruined tower to tell of outrage, no gorgeous temple to speak of ostentation; but freedom's offspring—peace and security dwell there, the spirits of the scene. On the margin of that gentle river the village girls may ramble unmolested, and the glad school-boy, with hook and line, pass his bright holiday; those neat dwellings, unpretending to magnificence, are the abodes of plenty. And in looking over the uncultivated scene, the mind may travel far into futurity. Where the wolf roams, the plough shall glisten; on the gray crag shall rise temple and tower; mighty deeds shall be done in the yet pathless wilderness; and poets yet unborn shall sanctify the soil.

It was my intention to attempt a description of several districts remarkable for their picturesqueness; but I fear to trespass much longer on your time and patience. Yet I cannot but express my sorrow that the beauty of such landscapes are quickly passing away; the ravages of the axe are daily increasing, and the most noble scenes are often laid desolate with a wantonness and barbarism scarcely credible in a people who call themselves civilized.

The way-side is becoming shadeless, and another generation will behold spots, now rife with beauty, bleak and bare. This is a regret rather than a complaint. I know, full well, that the forest must be felled for fuel and tillage, and that roads and canals must be constructed, but I contend that beauty should be of some value among us; that where it is not necessary to destroy a tree or a grove, the hand of the woodman should be checked, and even the consideration, which alas, weighs too heavily with us, of a few paltry dollars, should be held as nought

in comparison with the pure and lasting pleasure that we enjoy, or ought to enjoy, in the objects which are among the most beautiful creations of the Almighty. Among the inhabitants of this village, he must be dull indeed, who has not observed how, within the last ten years, the beauty of its environs has been shorn away; year by year the groves that adorned the banks of the Catskill wasted away; but in one year more fatal than the rest the whole of that noble grove by Van Vechten's mill, through which wound what is called the Snake Road, and at the same time the ancient grove of cedar, that shadowed the Indian burying-ground, were cut down. I speak of these in particular, because I know that many of you remember them well; they have contributed to your enjoyment as well as mine; their shades were long the favorite walk and ride.

After my return from Europe, I was proud to speak of that delightful spot, to walk there with my friends, and whenever opportunity offered to take persons of taste to view it, and as we trod the velvet grass beneath those noble trees, and pointed out the distant mountains, and the quiet stream below, to say: This is a spot that in Europe would be considered as one of the gems of the earth; it would be sought for by the lovers of the beautiful, and protected by law from desecration. But its beauty is gone, and that which a century cannot restore is cut down; what remains? Steep, arid banks, incapable of cultivation, and seamed by unsightly gullies, formed by the waters which find no resistance in the loamy soil. Where once was beauty, there is now barrenness. But I will conclude, and in the hope that, though feebly urged, the importance of cultivating a taste for scenery will not be forgotten. Nature has spread for us a rich and delightful banquet—shall we turn away from it? We are still in Eden; the wall that shuts us out of the garden is our own ignorance and folly. We ought not to allow the poet's words to be applicable to us:

“Deep in rich pasture do thy flocks complain?  
Not so; but to their master is denied  
To share the sweet serene.”

May we at times turn from the ordinary pursuits of life to the pure enjoyment of rural nature; which is in the soul like a fountain of cool waters to the way-worn traveller; and let us

“Learn  
The laws by which the Eternal doth sublime  
And sanctify his works, that we may see  
The hidden glory veiled from vulgar eyes.”

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# Rain Like Cotton

by Jennifer Kabat

Originally published in Bomb Magazine, 2017

## PART I: SAND

*“Architecture, fashion—yes, even the weather—are in the interior of the collective.... They stand in the cycle of the eternally selfsame, until the collective seizes upon them in politics and history emerges.”*—Walter Benjamin, The Arcades Project

Picture an area the size of Manhattan covered in sand. It rises and falls and disappears.

It begins twenty thousand years ago in an age beyond imagination. To talk of it is to speak in approximations. Ice two miles thick licks down in lobes across New York State. Lick is too gentle a verb for its progress. The earth’s mantle bows and breaks under the burden. Lakebeds are carved; layers of rock sheered off, ground down into sand and debris. Then a few thousand years of warming. The debris, boulders, and gravel held by the ice are picked up and moved hundreds of miles. The ice leaves a chain of frozen lakes—glacial lakes Iroquois, Vermont, and Albany—their names a bit of hubris, as if to help us picture these places. The largest, Lake Iroquois, melts; its far end rebounds as the ice lifts and tilts the lake east. Near present-day Rome, New York, one hundred miles from the Canadian border, an ice dam contains the water. Two hundred seventy miles south, glacial debris forms another dam at the base of what will one day be Staten Island. The weight of water is overbearing, and it rushes out at twenty-four million gallons a second, almost forty times the pressure of Niagara’s greatest falls. Fresh water spills into the ocean. Desalinization. The currents shut down; the Gulf Stream stops circulating; another ice age begins. Lake Iroquois becomes Lake Ontario; Lake Vermont disappears into Lake Champlain, and Lake Albany drains entirely, leaving sand where its shores had been.

It blows from west to east and settles in dunes. They stabilize, held in place by pitch pine and scrub oak. Animals move in. Blueberries grow. It is 8,000 years ago, 6,000, then the centuries we call the “common era,” but people don’t live in this inland sand sea. They venture in and out, criss- crossing on footpaths. The trees burn periodically. Species that depend on fire live here. The pines will only release their seeds with heat. The Lenni- Lenape and Iroquois now cross these sandy planes and do the burning. The blueberries need the clearings. Hunting here is easy.



It will come to be called a “barren,” a pine barren, the barrenness itself of this place leading it to be called in geographic descriptions a “waste” and “waste-land,” because nothing seems to grow here, nothing of value, no crops. This is why it will become a dump, a trailer park, sold off in schemes and scams. People who are overlooked, or want to be, settle here. The Shakers in 1776; Loyalists to the crown hide in the dunes during the Revolutionary War. Thieves take cover in the woods, and, later, African Americans arrive running from slavery, then hanging trees and Jim Crow laws. The Shakers first live crowded in a single log cabin. They are led by a woman whose followers believe she is the second coming of Christ, and they hope no one will bother them as they straighten the streams and haul in arable soil to build a new society where men and women are equal. The footpaths become roads. Stagecoaches charge five cents per mile and armed guards accompany travelers.

By 1830 there is a railroad, and not even 150 years later: two interstates, a landfill, six-lane roads called “extensions,” slip roads, on-ramps, and off-ramps. Cars blow by and the steady roar of tandem trailers passes in waves. Now it’s one of the rarest landscapes in the United States, and it’s just on the outskirts of Albany.

## PART II: ROADS

I also arrive by car, lost, to go to the mall. Next time: it’s driving to the Albany airport off the poetically named “Northway,” as I-87 stretches to Canada. I turn onto a six-lane road of intermittent stoplights, strip malls, and gas stations. It’s the nowhere of anywhere, no different than the six-lane roads where I grew up outside Washington, DC: the Tile Shop, nail salon, gas stations, Trader Joe’s, and Whole Foods. They will eventually become my Tile Shop, nail salon, Trader Joe’s, and Whole Foods. The first time I visit, neither exist here yet, and now when I’m there I think about what soon won’t exist—the small extinctions of Sears and Regal Cinemas. I pull out from the Colonie Center Whole Foods with an expensive bottle of probiotics, and across the street is an empty beige building. A shadow of its past adorns the front: Barnes & Noble.

This land of strip malls and sand is technically in Colonie, New York, which itself didn’t always exist, at least not in name. The town was first called “Niskayuna”—“vast corn fields” in a bastardization of the Mohawk word. (Mohawk itself is Europeanized and bastardized and not how the Iroquois named themselves. That was Kanienkehaka, meaning the “people of the Flint Place.”) Niskayuna disappeared to become the town of Watervliet (water-flood) in the early nineteenth century, and now it’s Colonie with that strange-ie ending and an etymology stretching back to a Dutch patroon, the land here belonging originally to the Van Rensselaer family. I say “originally,” but you should know that means “originally” for European colonists.

Small splintered scraps are all that is left of the sand. They're "relics" or a "relict," and I love the word if not the fragmentation it describes. It means an eco-system that has been confined, constricted, and cut off, or, where geomorphology is concerned, a place formed by forces no longer active. The sands hint, too, at an earlier era in the word's broader definition: some lost survivor. Or, there's its anachronistic meaning: a widow. Separated by death. Meanwhile relict first arose in the Scottish Acts of Parliament in the 1580s, where it meant land left by water's retreat.

Water retreats, husbands die, land is isolated and confined, floods and glaciers disappear. No doubt as James VI ruled Scotland in the late sixteenth century, no one considered glacial retreat, or the idea of what might lie across the seas in a place yet to be called "Albany."

In 1895 Colonie superseded the place that had been called "water-flood," and Watervliet decided to form a new town. Surveyors collected all the vacant strips of land they could find—less than three acres in total. The town would use them to collect debts. The state supreme court said no; ghosts can't file cases. Relicts have no protection under the law.

The first time I go to the airport, a decade ago, I know nothing of sand. I see no extinctions, no relicts or fragments. A sign with a silhouette of a plane points left, so does another that says "Shaker Site." I follow the Shakers and the plane. I turn onto Albany Shaker Road. This is before liquids are banned, and people in bold Yves Klein-blue uniforms inspect bags, passports, shoes, and belts. I drop my husband at departures and decide to find the Shakers, thrilled that the celibate socialists could be nearby.

After the airport the Shaker signs disappear. I keep going. I get disoriented. Time and space spread out. Marsh grasses wave at an angry sky hazed with heat. A sign says I am driving to Schenectady. A blue sign implores drivers looking for "Old Albany Shaker Road Businesses" to turn right. I turn right. Trash billows on the verge. On all these roads, trash billows.

There are no Shakers here, no history, no sites, nothing picturesque, just Hertz, the Comfort Inn, and rusting chain-link fences. The road dead-ends at the county jail, another fence, and the runway. I have no idea this is all the Shaker site. It will take me years to discover that.

In 1959 Nabokov says of the sand: "People go there on Sundays to picnic, shedding papers and beer cans." In a letter he writes, "Nothing else of popular or scientific interest is to be found in that neighborhood." Except butterflies. That's why he comes. He discovers a species here and returns to see it each June. The butterfly lives a few days and dies. His novel *Invitation of a Small Creature* describes how they rose from "a damp patch of sand" and, "revealing the celestial hue of their upper surface, they fluttered around like blue snowflakes before settling again."

The butterfly depends on one specific flower that depends on the sand and fire to survive. The butterfly is the Karner blue; Karner is a place that no longer exists, created by a man, Theodore Karner, who ran a land scheme in the nineteenth century. The village he designed and its train station are gone. All that is left is a road named for him: New Karner Road. The butterflies fluttered around like blue snowflakes. Karner was first called “Center.” The Center is gone. Karner is gone, the butterfly nearly extinct. It is on the endangered species list.

A few years after Nabokov’s visits, Governor Nelson Rockefeller stands in the sand breaking ground for a state university campus. It is 1962. He heaves a shovel over his shoulder. He dreams of universal education. It will level inequalities and create a meri- tocracy; all we need is access for all. Nabokov writes Pnin in the late fifties. Like Nabokov, Pnin fled first the Communists, then the Nazis, to land in America. Despite World War II and the rise of totalitarianism, it’s an era that believes the world is improving, that we control the land, that our possibilities are endless. A cloud of sand rises like smoke as Rockefeller grimaces, and I know this is the sand of history and hope.

I return to the sand, though, for a ghost: a woman whose bones were broken, born on leap year’s day. She was the illiterate daughter of a blacksmith. She called herself “Ann the word”; others called her “mother” though all her children died. She is Ann Lee, founder of the Shakers, Christ incarnate as a woman. By now, like Nabokov, I have come countless times to this place. It is a rainy day in January. The weather is wrong, too warm, everything sodden and heavy—puddles, tarmac, and sky. One of the last three surviving Shakers has just died in Maine, and I have finally found the Shaker site. I walk into the Meeting House through one of three doors. Originally, this one was for the ministry; another was for women, and the third for men, but none for me. No outsiders could enter.

Inside, the floor gleams and ladder-back chairs line the walls. The mystic monk Thomas Merton wrote before he died, “The peculiar grace of a Shaker chair is due to the fact that it was made by someone capable of believing that an angel might come and sit on it.” If you were a true believer, you could see the spirit world clear as day. This is what the Shakers called the “gift,” and even Shaker scholars have talked of experiencing it. I want the spirits to talk to me; I study the room and its chairs, and I don’t see angels.

Instead I find a single car parked by a pond that bears Ann Lee’s name. Rain careens off the gray ice. Overhead, jets take off. Signs warn of Lyme disease. I turn back. I don’t have a gift. I’m cold and wet and worried about what that lone car is doing on an isolated road in the rain.

Here, the Shakers believed they would build the world anew, heaven on Earth. All would be equal, men and women, black and white. They were collective and utopian; their communities were the most successful experiment in socialism,

outlasting that of the Soviets. In trying to find these spirits, I've combed documents and diaries, even urban planning schemes. One hand-drawn Shaker map includes a note by the cemetery: "Mother Ann Lee was buried but the land did not belong to the believers & she was removed to land belonging to the society in the spring of 1835. C." She was buried and reburied. Now all that survives her are four torn scraps of fabric.

*March 20: Truckloads of furniture get taken away.*

*Feb 8, Feb 13, April 13: boys from the Pre come for candy.*

*March 14 Lady comes in a car.... More furniture gets shipped off.... Two sisters go to the airport; 10 bus-loads of children come to see the airplanes....*

*June 22: Rest a while and go over to the airport. Pay \$10 of my own money to go up in the airship....*

*July 4: Go to airport to see the highest flier come down—19,900 feet high.*

*Aug. 29: Two men come to talk about buying 200 acres for a golf course....*

*Thanksgiving: A fine chicken dinner. Eldress Anna, Caroline, Ella and myself go to see The Golddiggers at the Madison Theater in Albany.*

Utopian dreams, socialist values, sand. The stock market crashes. The kids from the Pre collect pennies. Gold Diggers. The celibate sisters see a movie about sex.

The film is a play within a play where showgirls search for men and money, neither of which tally with Shaker values. There's drinking and dancing on tables. Girls sleep with married men. The story hinges on one dancer's failure to say: "I am the spirit of the ages and the progress of civilization."

Sister Lucy's diary ends on Thanksgiving. She never says if she likes the movie. Its hit song is "Painting the Clouds with Sunshine."

*When I hold back a tear / To make a smile appear*

*I'm only painting the clouds with sunshine....*

*When I pretend I'm gay / I never feel that way....*

The Shakers and their socialist dreams are nearly extinct, and all that remains of the movie are the last twenty minutes. The rest has disappeared.

### PART III. CLOUDS

I stand in the shadow of a mountain. It's early autumn; asters and goldenrod bob their heads. The mountain is fenced in, and the top is flat. On it a tanker spews water. The truck is so high and distant it looks like a toy. The mountain, though, is not a mountain; it is the Albany landfill, nearly 200 acres of trash, 360,000 tons deposited a year. I'm here with a biologist. He first came twenty years ago to volunteer on the controlled fires set each summer that preserve the sand and butterflies, scrub oak and pines.

We cross a sandy track so fine and golden we could be at the beach. A few feet away, the ground turns gray. A tire tread is hardened into it. The biologist tells me it's clay like glaciers deposit today. They melt, leaving areas that pond and pool where the clay filters out. Same here, he says, just millennia ago. He's showing me a glacier in this shadow of the dump, a shadow of trash filled with what we've discarded. The dump is a shadow, too, or will be soon. It will close in 2020 to be returned to sand and scrub and Nabokov's butterflies, those blue clouds of snow. The biologist waves across this meadow. Five years ago, he says, there were streets, sidewalks, and septic systems here. The stream, the pond, and nodding flowers are all new. Even the sand has been brought in. In the background, the incessant beeping of reversing trucks blends with waves of cars on the interstate.

At home, I zoom in on this spot with Google Earth. Shadowy lines appear on-screen over the sand and scrub. These shadows were roads. Hovering over them with a mouse, their names appear: Fox Run Lane, Brier Fox Boulevard, Tally Ho Drive, Fox Hound Avenue, Hunters Glen Avenue.... They conjure British landed gentry, the sort who'd wear red tailcoats and jodhpurs, and ride to hounds, as if that could ever exist behind the landfill. What did were a hundred trailer homes. Google Street View shows images of them from 2007: a paneled home with an SUV outside, next door a sedan, and yellow siding on the house. Some lots just appear as grass and foundation. The street is already crumbling into tarmac. The county bought it up to transform it back into pine sands, which will burn regularly.

I do find a ghost at the Shaker site: Rebecca Cox Jackson. She dreamt of clouds and the atmosphere. She was African American, became celibate, left her husband, and traveled the East Coast preaching a vision of salvation before joining the Shakers. She'd been illiterate but discovered she could read. It was a blessing. It was God. She picked up a Bible and the words were alive. "Eldress," she became a leader, and in 1843, just after her first visit to Watervliet, she dreamed of rain and flowers.

*Sunday, 12th of March, after midnight, I laid down, fell asleep and ... looked up into the air, saw wonderful strange colored clouds coming from the east.... It began to rain, as if it were cotton, until the earth was covered.... All the house, trees, and everything else disappeared. And then the rain changed from cotton to sweet-smelling flowers.... I stepped to the door, picked some up, tasted them. Their taste was sweet just like the smell. I then put some in my bosom, but I am not able to tell what they smelt like. The whole air was perfumed with their odor, yea, with their heavenly smell.... In that storm came streams of light. And they came in the form of hoops, white as snow, bright as silver, passing through the shower of flowers. They went like the lightning.*

At the end of her vision she began ministering to people. "I comforted them with the words that was given to me for them. They were all colored people, and they heard me gladly.... I, Rebecca Jackson, was two-score and eight years and

and twenty-six days old, when in 1843, I dreamed about my people....”

In her dreams there are strange clouds and cotton rain. “Sparks of light shower down like silver.” She also writes about how the Shakers are too self-absorbed in their isolation. “How will the world be saved if the Shakers are the only people of God on earth, and they seemed so busy in their own concerns?”

I think of her in the shadow of the dump. How do we stop being so busy in our own concerns?

She cries. She loves a woman, Rebecca Perot. Together they join the community at Watervliet. “The two Rebeccas,” the Shakers call them. Their relationship is hard to understand from our distance of 175 years. The Rebeccas don’t fit into our time, maybe not even into theirs. Were they mother and surrogate daughter? Friends? Lovers? Companions? The two Rebeccas: inseparable, inscrutable.

I don’t find either of their graves. The other Rebecca, Rebecca Perot, took Jackson’s name when she died in 1871. She became the second Eldress Rebecca Cox Jackson. Together they established an urban ministry, mostly for women, mostly African American women. Most of them worked as domestic help in Philadelphia.

*“I’m painting the blue, beautiful hues,” the song goes in Gold Diggers of Broadway, “Colored with gold and old rose.... Trying to drown all of my woes.... If I keep painting the clouds with sunshine.... Hold back a tear / To make a smile appear.”*

I find a single drawing of Eldress Rebecca Jackson online. Her head juts out, as if she’s trying to fix on something in the distance. She wears a white Shaker cap and shawl, and holds a pen in one hand. Her two fingers are raised like Christ giving a benediction in some ancient icon. Two books are by her side, but I can read nothing into her. I see no rain, no hoops white as snow. I want to see her and the other Rebecca. I walk across the Shaker site past the two cop cars. The three men watch me warily. Or I am wary. I feel their watching. I try not to drift into their gaze. I try to look as if I know where I am going.

The picture turns out not to be Jackson at all but another woman, as if any black woman in modest garb might be her.

Jackson wakes up on January 14, 1848, dreaming that she was in Philadelphia in bed with the other Rebecca. “I thought someone might come in while we slept. And I said, ‘Rebecca, go and get three forks, and fasten the doors.’ ...Rebecca rose immediately, and as she put the fork over the latch, a man rushed against the door ....”

Soon a Shaker brethren appeared outside, so did a well and a tub, and intimations of violence. He threw watermelons. The earth shook. She “saw a river of

ice ... and three ice rocks in it, and three men upon the rocks ... . The shaking of the earth caused the river, the rocks and the men to move up and down, and the men moved their hands like a person shooting.” They transformed into “one transparent brightness—white as snow and bright as silver... rays of light ... a brilliant circle. And in my heart the sight was magnificent.”

*In my heart the site was magnificent. But I stand in the rain, sodden.*

That afternoon in the shadow of the mountain when the goldenrod bloomed and nodded, I ask the biologist why the tanker is spraying water.

“Water?” he says puzzled.

“Up there,” I point, “for the grasses, right?” I assume native grasses have been planted on the dump’s plateau.

He laughs. “It’s not water. It’s air freshener... Febreze.” Indeed, the smell wafts over us. It has a green chemical scent like drier sheets. He and I stand on these spectral streets, the air filled with clouds of water, of rain—and of chemicals sprayed to mask the smell of trash. Jackson’s flowers fell in bunches after the rain. *I put some in my bosom, but I am not able to tell what they smell like. The whole air was perfumed with their odor, yea, with their heavenly smell...*

I’ve come to the dump to find the future and the past. Both haunt me in this place once named for a dream of England that must have seemed distant living here in a doublewide, near roads that memorialize a disappearing wilderness.

The biologist tells me Nabokov’s endangered butterflies probably won’t survive. They can’t even fly across a four-lane road let alone a highway, and the issue, he explains, isn’t protecting one species but all species and their habitat. It is not one thing but all things. They’re interdependent. *How will the world be saved?* Jackson wrote.

The butterflies rise like snowflakes. Rockefeller throws sand. It lifts like a cloud. Rain falls like cotton. Hoops white as snow, bright as silver, pass like lightning. I’m painting the clouds....

Online, looking at the landfill and lost streets and lanes, I think about relicts and widows, Eldress Rebecca Jackson and Rebecca Perot. I think too about the Internet and our lives. Google’s data centers use nearly 300 million watts of energy a year. The Internet consumes around five percent of all energy usage. Stream music, TV, movies, shop online, subscribe online, pay bills online—or read this essay online. All of this life—our lives—happens online—in clouds, in the cloud, the cloud that is run by farms, server farms. All of this needs energy. The quaintly named cloud, which can seem as ethereal as the air and the sky, uses thirty

billion watts of energy worldwide. A third of this is eaten up by data centers in the US—and that statistic is out of date, that was in 2012. One data center takes more power than most towns in the US, and our energy usage has only increased despite attempts to stave off global warming. By 2020 the number of connected devices drawing on data and energy will more than triple, and by 2030, information technologies in the Internet of things could account for as much as twenty percent of total energy use.

This is what haunts me. The Gulf Stream is weakening; the climate will warm or cool precipitously, maybe even both in turn. The catastrophic changes that brought the sand to Albany happened in a timescale inscrutable to us, taking place over millennia instead of decades. In a human timeframe the dump will close. It will be planted with prairie grasses. Every year is the warmest on record, and glaciers melt.

The Karner blue lives less than a week.

The butterfly depends on fire and smoke to survive. The Shakers got their start here in smoke and clouds. It was the Dark Day. At noon in mid-May 1780 the depth of night spread from Maine to New Jersey. The Revolutionary War languished. Many saw it as the end times. The Shakers decided it was time to proselytize. The darkness wasn't God, though, or the end—just a forest fire. The smoke had drifted east. As the ranks of Shakers grew, they cleared the land. An airport followed. They lent their tools to build it and the sisters fed the workers. Then a golf course, a dump, a university, the interstate, and climate change. That's the prophecy I find.

Lucy Bowers dies in 1935. The last three Shaker sisters leave Albany in 1938. In a newspaper interview, they say what they miss most are the airport's planes and floodlights.

*When I'm blue, all I have to do is paint the clouds....* Shopping, self-creation, reinvention, reincarnation, faith... Longing has shaped this landscape. Or maybe this place has shaped them. They've all taken root here in the sand—airport, strip mall, suburbs. I find them in the wake of our dreams of progress. Throw something out and start over. Trash, sand, and highways, flight, clouds, silver orbs, and socialism's most successful experiment.

In a letter as Marx was dying, Friedrich Engels wrote, "Remember the Shakers!" He wanted to remind Marx that it had taken the Shakers years to build their community. This was the last thing Engels said to him, *Remember...*

Ann Lee died on September 8, 1784. She was forty-eight. During her life, she was forced to strip to prove she was a woman, dragged behind a horse, imprisoned for treason because as a pacifist she couldn't support a war. She didn't believe in the legitimacy of the state or even Christmas. She was exhumed in 1835, and it was



clear her skull had been fractured before she died. I find her grave. The stone is new and white like bone. The day feels like spring. It is February. At the edge of the cemetery, a tree hides broken markers. So many shattered graves, the violence is inescapable.

Christ's second coming, she preached that celibacy would create equality and the community of believers destroyed the traditional family structure. One hundred years after her death, Engels wrote in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* that the family was a tool of capitalism and women's oppression. Rebecca Jackson saw herself as a second Ann Lee. Illiterate, they both left their husbands for faith and wanted to rebuild society.

By the time you read this, an ice shelf the size of Delaware will have broken off from Antarctica. As glaciers melt, fresh water is released into the oceans, slowing currents. The flood 13,000 years ago looks like prologue or prophecy. Touch the sand, drive the roads, go to the mall. Cotton rain falls in the shadow of the dump.

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# Essay after Visiting the Thomas Cole National Historic Site, Written from a Skyscraper

By Stephanie Nikolopoulos

The afternoon sunlight illuminates the stratocumulus clouds brushed across the sky. Warm gold swathes the underpinnings of the graying clouds. Hanging heavy in the atmosphere, the clouds look as if they are lit from within. They emanate radiance. In the muted blue-gray canvas of sky, the light is a dash of hope. It pierces the stratosphere, offering a glimpse of the beyond—of something wild and too beautiful to comprehend.

This frenzy of light is fleeting. As the sun continues its world-weary descent, the wind whips the clouds into a thick paste that casts shadows across the tops of the sliver buildings that litter the skyline. I step back, noticing how the nearly floor-to-ceiling windows in front of me act as a frame to the living, moving painting before my eyes. My focus shifts from the heavenward toward the manmade world in front of me. The underpinnings of Manhattan reveal themselves. Dinosaur-bone-like scaffolding across the street announces a change to the architecture of the city. Just as the earth rotates on its axis with the passage of time, so the American landscape is ever changing.

I am cocooned on the seventeenth floor of a skyscraper in Midtown Manhattan. It is where I spend most of my waking hours. If I stand at precisely the right place and strain my eyes, I can see a small sliver of the Hudson River sparkling between the buildings in the foreground. As a boat glides past, I consider all the people who have arrived on America's shores—those who have embraced this land, cultivated it, demanded something from it, changed it. In 1609 English explorer Henry Hudson looked for the Northeast Passage. A little more than two hundred years later, Englishman Thomas Cole sat outside on his porch in Catskill, New York, painting how the Industrial Revolution was desecrating the American landscape. Soon after that, Scotsman John Muir traversed the Sierra Nevada, advocating for the preservation of America's wilderness.

By the time Swiss photographer Robert Frank road-tripped through America in the 1950s, he was documenting long stretches of highway, crowded buses, and drive-ins. Not long after that, my father, born in a small village in Greece, circumnavigated the globe as a sea captain before settling in the United States. I contemplate this history—my history, America’s history—as I look out the window displaying one of the greatest cities of the world.

From my perch, the great sprawl of buildings growing up out of the concrete is like a dense forest of steel trees. The skyscrapers are like heliotropic plants, tall and reaching for the sun.

I think of Icarus, flying too close to the sun.

I think of the tower of Babel, tumbling to the ground instead of reaching heaven.

I think of the World Trade Center.

I started working in Manhattan a month after 9/11. Commuting from the suburbs of New Jersey, I checked the skyline every single morning when we rounded the great curve toward the Lincoln Tunnel. I kept watch over the Empire State Building, morning after morning, evening after evening. I was sure it would be the next target. The next great manmade structure to tumble. Made by man; destroyed by man. More than fifteen years later and now living in Manhattan, I still find myself counting buildings, making sure they’re all still there. These beautiful structures show both our capacity for achievement and our capacity for destruction. These gravity-defying feats are designed and labored over by genius artists yet destructible by terrorists. They house individuals, businesses, and governments that have the power to change the world for better or for worse. It’s a subject I face not only as a New Yorker navigating the post-9/11 city but also as an editor sometimes working on books grappling with understanding the biographies of history’s most treacherous leaders and regimes. There are people who want to climb so high, who want to reach the sky—no matter who or what they step on and crush in the process. There are people who want to destroy instead of create.

With the proliferation of shootings in cinemas and schools, my office has begun holding active shooter drills. We’ve had two drills in as many months. One afternoon in 2017, the sound of sirens reached our windows: a wrong-way driver in a Honda Accord had sped into a crowd of pedestrians in Times Square, killing one and injuring many more. If I allow myself to think the worst of humanity, it begins to feel as if I am a character in Richard Connell’s 1924 short story “The Most Dangerous Game,” in which a man no longer challenged by hunting animals turns to hunting men. Instead, I make a choice to keep looking up. There is too much life to live, too much beauty to see, too much good to embrace and to generate.

When I step over into my colleague's cubicle, I can see the uppermost portion of the Empire State Building, that mammoth Art Deco building designed by Shreve, Lamb & Harmon, signifying power, imperialism, and greatness. The term "empire" reminds me of the Algonquian Native Americans pushed out of this land and of the pioneers that pressed West in Manifest Destiny. Towns and cities built up; the American landscape forever changed. From 1931 to 1970, the Empire State Building stood as the tallest building in the entire world; even that changed when the World Trade Center construction was completed. It occurs to me that there is perhaps nothing more American than change.

The city reinvents itself endlessly. I find myself routinely dodging construction zones. Coworkers gather around windows to guess at what new constructions are being built up around us. Stores shut down, and new ones open up. The skyline has even changed in the sixteen years I've worked here. Most of the time, it happens so slowly it doesn't even register, save for the World Trade Center. It's really only when I leave the city that I am startled by how much the view I once saw from my bus-ride commute has changed. Condominiums have gone up along the New Jersey side of the Hudson, blocking most of the iconic New York City skyline. The small snatches of view show a small island that has somehow managed to grow bigger with buildings. Though the architectural and political landscape affects me, it is the ever-moving-turnstile of people that is more difficult for me to process. Colleagues, neighbors, friends, and even family come and go in this transient city.

I have changed too. The city has molded me. Shaped me. Inspired me. And at times, worn me down. Here, I have grown into my dreams, experiencing opportunities that one can only have in a big city. But I have also found myself exhausted from the constant struggle to push ahead, a result of which has been that I've lost a bit of myself. I've lost the part of me that plays and does things just for fun. Even activities meant for enjoyment and socializing begin to feel like obligations and work, as I consider how to best network with the people I meet and whether the event is somehow "worthy" of pitching as an article to a newspaper or posting about on social media. Many nights I am frittering away at the computer in my office, tweaking jacket copy and writing up tweets to promote the publishing house's books, and as the years go by I wonder how so much around me has changed when I feel my life has in some ways stayed the same.

I can tell the passing of hours, the changing of the seasons, by which buildings the sun sinks into in the evening and how many of my colleagues are still left in the office building at that time. In winters, the sun sets before even those who departed promptly at 5 o'clock could put on their jackets and scarves to rush to the elevators. It sets over downtown New York, the mellow sunlight over the long expanse of city street reminiscent of some western film cliché about walking off into the sunset. In summers, the sun sets between the thin band of sky between the buildings along the Hudson River. Pink and orange hues begin to dazzle

my eyes as the digits of the clock on my computer screen creep toward 8pm. It is brilliant. It is a wonder to behold. Every evening it is a little different. Every evening sunset is special.

Some nights, I get so wrapped up in projects, in deadlines, in the rat race, that I forget to look. I forget to observe. I forget to feel. To dream. To shake myself loose from the ropes of routine. I sit in the same positions for hours at a time. My light is the fluorescent tubes inset in the ceiling and backlight of the computer. Back to the window, head bowed to the computer screen, I am urged by the coworker across from my cube to turn around to see the sunset. I need these reminders. When my company first moved into this building, I mistook the reflection of the golden yellows and fiery oranges of the neon sign for The Lion King on Broadway as the sunset glinting on the building. I mistook artificial light for natural light. I have been in the city too long.

That's why I knew when my friend Mark, a longtime Manhattanite who often pulls me into building lobbies to show me fantastic architectural elements I never would've otherwise guessed resided there, suggested we break out of the city to visit an artist's home I knew I had to listen. I knew I would not be disappointed by his taste—and I knew I needed a sojourn, a respite, an adventure. His friend Dorothea, who would soon become my friend too, rented a car for the occasion. Driving out of the city, we hit Route 4 and slid onto Route 17—the highways of my mall-laden Bergen County, New Jersey, youth—and then shot out to open skies. Mountains. Trees aglow with autumn's touch. The two-hour drive passed quickly as we shook off the anxiety of the city and spoke of family, faith, and art.

It was as if we'd stepped back in time when we stepped out of the car after pulling into the driveway to Thomas Cole's residence, Cedar Grove, in Catskil, New York. Certainly part of it was that I found myself ensconced in a Federal-style home filled with timeworn objects d'art. My eyes soaked in that most marvelous periwinkle-splashed entryway. My feet tread upon the ornate floor our guide described as designed after the one in Cole's contemporary James Fenimore Cooper's nearby home, Otsego Hall, in Cooperstown. I lingered over the musty leatherbounds on the bookshelf, imagining fervent conversations that may have taken place between the great artists and writers of the Hudson River School. That was it! I was imagining again. Dreaming again. Desirous of creating art. I had molted the hardened soot of the city and was growing soft again.

Out on Cole's porch, I looked out at the landscape set before my eyes and wondered how much of it has changed since the painter lived here in the early 1800s. I saw a house that was most likely not there at the time, and telephone wires that certainly weren't. Mostly, though I saw trees. Tall, beautiful, strong trees. It had been an exceptionally warm autumn, perhaps a sign of global warming, and only a handful of leaves had changed their colors. They were growing wild into the Catskill Mountains and its "Wall of Manitou." Off in the distance was the

Hudson River—that same river I could see from my office building in New York City. On Cedar Grove’s porch, I found a journal with these words from Cole’s 1836 “Essay on American Scenery” written upon it:

“May we at times turn from the ordinary pursuits of life to the pure enjoyment of rural nature; which is in the soul like a fountain of cool waters to the way-worn traveller.”

Cole’s words made me think of Jack Kerouac, that restless traveler who, refusing to conform to a desk job, criss-crossed the country talking nonstop mad talk about literature and love and life with his friends, captured so fervently in his 1957 novel *On the Road*. Though one often associates the Beat Generation writer with automobiles speeding down highways, the jazz clubs of Harlem, and the San Francisco scene, he often retreated from city life, seeking out peace and solitude. He writes of climbing California’s Matterhorn Peak in *The Dharma Bums*; living in a cabin in Bixby Canyon, California, in *Big Sur*; and being a fire lookout in Washington’s North Cascade Mountains in *Desolation Angels*. It seemed as if he felt a constant tension between wanting to be in the city and wanting to be in nature. I can relate.

My thoughts turned to Walt Whitman, whose birth home I visited in Huntington, Long Island, a few summers ago. He too bounced between working in New York City and living in the more pastoral community of Laurel Springs in New Jersey. I think of his sensual, dreamy *Leaves of Grass*, in which he wrote: “I loaf and invite my soul, / I lean and loaf at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.” I wonder when the last time I let my mind wander to the beautiful mundane.

Cole, an immigrant from England, mourned the Industrial Revolution wreaking havoc through the rugged American beauty of his chosen home. Though he besmirched it, our guide told us that Catskills’ proximity to New York City allowed the painter to cultivate relationships necessary to his career. It dawns on me that an artist does well to have both city and nature, people and solitude, a firm foundation and a chance to explore.

An artist is like a bird. We do well when we migrate. We need to be able to stretch our wings. To fly. To encounter.

We like our perches in the city because they allow us to see a wide spectrum of characters. Some of us feed off the energy, the excitement. Yet an artist sometimes needs something rawer. Something wilder. An artist needs to see sunsets not just billboards. An artist needs to see flowers and oak trees not just skyscrapers.

I find myself at the precipice. From my little tree-house cubicle in Midtown, as

I survey the ever-changing neon lights of the city and feather-touch the keyboard to type out my musings about the nature of life, I consider how beautiful change is. Change forces us out of the nest. It reminds us of our histories while simultaneously directing us toward our futures. America and the world at large is changing. It is becoming a global economy, and in many ways the world feels smaller and more connected than ever before thanks to physical, digital, and political infrastructures. We can work and stay in relationship even as we travel, yet we still crave time off the grid to recharge our bodies and souls.

No matter how much we long to touch the sky, to reach the sun, we must still find time to humbly connect with nature, with ourselves, with our Creator. The American scenery encompasses the Empire State Building and the Redwood Forest, Route 66 and the Mississippi River, Mount Rushmore and the Catskill Mountains. We must set aside land for preservation while innovating our great cities. We must explore it all to understand who we are, where we're from, and where we want to head.

As change picks up speed and snowballs, we may not be able to reverse its effects, but we can slow them. We have a responsibility to protect our great American wilderness even as we embrace the new. Simultaneous to conservation and legislation, we need Art. We need to step inside art museums and libraries to recall our grand history. We need to behold the uninterrupted panoramic landscape of a Frederic Edwin Church painting. We need to read of Rip Van Winkle awakening to a changed world in Washington Irving's short story. We need to consider how a railroad executor commissioned Asher Durand to paint Progress to depict America's evolution from nature to technology. We need to appreciate how Kiki Smith's sound art recordings of babbling water remind us of how truly magnificent nature is when we stop to listen and see and experience it.

It is late now as I look outside my office window. Lights in windows across the skyscape look like stars, twinkling in this city night. The construction workers have all gone home for the evening, yet I remain building word upon word, reporting on the changing American scene around me, reminding others of the past, questioning what we call "improvement," yet always looking up.

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# Some Thoughts on My Hometown, Thomas Cole, and Our Catskill Landscape

by Sandra Dutton

## Deep History

I grew up in Norwood, Ohio, a city of 25,000 completely surrounded by Cincinnati. Our Main Street, known as “The Pike,” was once a toll road and many of our streets were originally Indian\* trails. My fifth grade teacher, Miss Marjorie Behrman, told us stories about the “old days”, how General “Mad” Anthony Wayne had come through our territory in 1794 and skirmished with Indians on the west side of town, still called Bloody Run. We also had an Indian mound at the northern, highest point of the city, which I passed every day to and from school, and which Miss Behrman said was a burial site. I loved climbing to the top and imagining the ceremonies that must have taken place.

But our lessons in history went even farther back, to the Ice Age. One morning in February, Miss Behrman took our class up through the woods to “the cliff”, as it was known, about fifty feet south of the Indian mound. Here she told us about the Ohio River: how it had once flowed through Norwood, but had been pushed south by glaciers. She pointed out the pile of gravel at the foot of the cliff, a glacial moraine. From then on, I would imagine how it was, a mass of blue ice inching down through Ohio.

I am similarly fascinated by Catskill history, and out where I live in Earleton, just nine miles from Catskill, stone walls meander across the landscape. I used to think they were all built two hundred years ago by European settlers, but recently learned from Matt Bua and his Talking Walls: Casting Out the Post-Contact Stone Wall Building Myth of the American Northeast, that many were probably built by Native Americans, and are therefore much older than estimated. Bua, an artist, writer, and archaeologist, also believes that many of the mounds of rocks seen in the Catskill region are possibly religious structures, also built by Native Americans. Taking walks on county roads, I sometimes follow the walls into the woods and wonder for whom they were a demarcation or symbol. And, as with Norwood, I am fascinated by the geological history of the area. I



often see geology students exploring the strata exposed by road cuts along Highway 23.

### Recent History

Growing up in Norwood, I had a fondness for The Pike, our Main Street. Our parents used to boast that you could find anything you needed in Norwood, that you didn't have to set foot in Cincinnati. There was Steinberg's, where my dad bought his suits. And Floto's, a small department store that had a basket for messages running on a pulley from the lower floor to the balcony. Even in the sixties we were amused by this ancient technology. We had several shoe stores and two dime stores, Woolworth's and Neisner's. I once painted a Halloween picture on Woolworth's window, a witch on a flying saucer, as part of a citywide decorating project. Cafes were everywhere—Snow White's, Tops Sandwich Shop, The Brown Derby. First National Bank, an imposing limestone building, stood on the corner of Main and Washington. There was a smoke shop that sold little packages of snuff. We kids bought it and tried it out. After all, hadn't George Washington used it? Down a side street, Sherman Avenue, was Mrs. Alison's Cookies, where boys (mostly) would stop and buy a bag of broken cookies for only a dime.

I thought our downtown would always remain the same. I imagined being able to come back, walk down the Pike and browse through some of the old stores and relive memories of growing up. But after moving to California and returning in the mid-seventies for a visit, I was shocked to discover that Main Street as I knew it was gone. The old buildings had been razed and in their place was a covered shopping mall called Surrey Square, the inside built to resemble a 19th century village. It had a tile floor and an occasional "gas" lamp that barely lit up the interior. Anchoring the shopping center was a massive grocery store and an assortment of chain stores including Radio Shack. It was fronted by a huge parking lot, once the location of many of the old shops. The warmth and personality of our downtown were gone. All of this was done in the name of "urban renewal": to modernize the city and keep it attractive for shoppers.\*\*

### Preservation and Repurposing

But buildings hold memories. So there hasn't been a time I've gone back that I didn't wish to see the old downtown. Repurposed would have been fine. I wouldn't have minded if First National had been turned into a restaurant. Or if Woolworth's had become a fitness center, Tops Sandwich Shop a video arcade. But the buildings are gone, and it's hard to imagine how it was. In fact, I can remember it better when I'm not there.

Here is where Catskill is fortunate. The 19th Century buildings still line Main Street. They may have changed hands and have slightly different facades, but

Street. They may have changed hands and have slightly different facades, but the bones and ambiance of the street are still there. I imagine if Thomas Cole, who lived in Catskill from 1827 to 1848, were to come back, that except for cars, he would feel right at home. I can picture him coming into town with a horse and wagon, stopping at a few stores for supplies, then going south on Main to The Point, where travelers stepped off the boats and traveled by stage up to the Catskill Mountain House. I study a pencil drawing by Thomas Cole, “Catskill Landing,” thinking he must have been on a hill near the The Point to make that sketch.

After sketching, he would have gone back to his home, Cedar Grove, on what is now Spring Street, and perhaps worked for a time in his studio. We are lucky to be able to visit these buildings today because twice they were almost demolished. First, when the builders of the Rip Van Winkle Bridge wanted to have the western approach come right through the house, concerned citizens voiced their disapproval and a new approach was mapped out.

And in the 1990s, the house was in such terrible condition, with one wall propped up and with serious leaks in the roof, some thought it should be destroyed, but Ray Beecher, a local historian, put up \$100,000 of his own money to buy the home and gave it to the Greene County Historical Society. A neighbor, who lived across the street, donated her own house when the state asked for matching funds. Thankfully, these concerned citizens stepped in so that now we can walk through the house and visit the studio, set up as if Cole were about to come in and work. We can also visit the newly reconstructed second studio he designed but was only able to work in for a year. And most inspiring of all, we can stand up on the porch and see Thomas Cole’s view of the Catskill Mountains.

We need to protect our heritage. Catskill has been threatened by the same forces that affected my hometown, that show no mercy for old buildings and wish to modernize at any cost. Jack Sencabaugh, a lifelong resident of Catskill and the host of *Back Tracks in Time*, quotes town historian Betty Larson, who said that in Catskill during the 1970s, the mania was to “tear down a building and put up a parking lot.”

But repurposing can save a town. Frank Cuthbert, a musician/songwriter and real estate developer, has renovated twenty-five buildings, among them 473 Main, built in about 1805 and designed to fit the curve of the street. He restored it, then opened BRIK Gallery in 2005, which he operated until a year ago. It is now the showroom for modern furniture designer CounterEv. The Dunn Builders Supply is also being transformed into performance space for the American Dance Institute from Rockville, Maryland. Slated to open in 2019, they have renamed themselves The Lumberyard. Still another exciting repurposing is the Bridge Street Theatre, founded in 2013 by actors and directors John Sowles and Steven Patterson. They bought an old factory building at 44 West Bridge Street and turned it into an exciting theatre, with a “speakeasy” and an 80 seat black box theatre, as well as gallery space.

One of my favorite views of Catskill is coming down Bridge Street, where “these bright blue hills”, as Thomas Cole described them, rise in the distance, one behind the other, and where I pass so many significant buildings: St. Patrick’s Church on the right, with its towering spire, then the old County Office Building on Franklin Street, which served for a time as the Masonic Temple and now as law offices. Across the street is the Carnegie Library, built in 1901, then reaching Main Street, there’s the Steifel & Winans law office on the southwest corner, with its two stories of green brick. I love the arches over each window and the white trim. And on the northwest corner are three historic bank buildings, all in a row: Catskill National, The Bank of Greene County, and Trustco. Though the buildings have changed hands through the years, one can look at photographs of Catskill from the 19th century and see that they’re still basically the same. I love walking down Main Street, glancing in at the shops, which are a mix of established and new. There’s the Corduroy Shop, with its eclectic mix of re-made furniture, clothing, and antique fabrics, the Magpie Bookstore, and three lovely cafes: 394, A Taste of Catskill, Hi-Lo. We also have the Greene County Council on the Arts, which has been in its present location since 1980.

### Our Challenge

It’s a delicate balance we tread—to preserve the buildings and history of our 19th Century Catskill and the beauty that surrounds us, as well as to keep up with technology. An exciting project that makes us aware of both is Matt Bua and Mollie Dash’s “mapping project”. Residents were given sections of a map of Catskill and asked to draw or write in information from the past, present, or future. The finished product is a 32” by 32” map with the Muhheakantuck (Hudson) River on the east and the Catskill Creek meandering through the center. It’s illustrated with drawings by Bua along with old photographs. We see that Broome Street was called Esop Road in 1889. And the Hoe Bowl, on Highway 23, was named after Hannah Hoes, 1783-1814. In the lower left hand corner is a legend for walls, trails, and small waterways.

If I were to add to this map, reaching into the future, I would suggest a museum of Catskill geology and archeology featuring the deep history of the area. And a steamboat museum or a museum of 19th century transportation. Also possible might be the restoration of St. Patrick’s Church on Bridge Street as a place of worship, or repurposed as a performance center. Finally, I envision a musical about Thomas Cole which celebrates his life in the Catskills and makes good use of his essays, stories, poems and paintings. This could be a collaboration among the arts groups of Catskill, a grand tribute to a man who loved the region and made it come alive for the rest of the country.

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\*I use the term Indian in these first two paragraphs because I'm describing my childhood, when the term was in common use.

\*\* Surrey Square shopping center has never been particularly successful and is now listed on Dead-Malls.com. The city did create another shopping center on the southeast border of town, razing several blocks of houses by eminent domain. That mall has flourished. But with the demolition of the old shopping area, our city lost its center.

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# Not Quite Thirteen Ways of Looking at the Landscape

by William Jaeger, 2018

with section headings by Thomas Cole, 1836

Thomas Cole made it personal. He was a Romantic. To be a true artist in his age meant going one on one with the largest forces one could summon, as did Turner and Delacroix and Goya. As did Beethoven late in his life, trying to wrestle out the Hercules in the soundboard.

Nature then was the mammoth that made us all powerless specks against winds and waves. But if nature insisted on our smallness, it did not imply our insignificance, because it was nature observed that made the land a landscape.

When Cole sketched the unruly cliffs and angular forests of the Catskills, he was one man alone and overwhelmed at the edge of the wilderness. And he needed it that way so that nature was what he envisioned. In his poem, *Lament of the Forest*, from around 1839, the year the very first photograph was made in North America, he drew this picture:

*Around it rose Walls of indurate rock, that upward swept  
Until they quiver'd mid th'Empyrean  
An amphitheater hugely built it seemed  
By giants of the primal world*

An unnamed God amidst the upward sweeping cliffs, hardened and imposing—this was Cole's sense of a wilderness filled with strength and power. The sublime! And yet the poem expounds the complaint of the forest, which is the unbearable fact that even these powerful forces were vulnerable to civilization. The forests were being destroyed, and all that would come would be parched ruin. He continues:

*Then all was harmony and peace — but man  
Arose — he who now vaunts antiquity —  
He the destroyer — amid the shades  
Of oriental realms, destruction's work began*

We could write off Cole's eco-prescience as coincidence, since his world view was so steeped in a traditional religious manifestation through nature. But that would be unfair, because the simpler truth is just this: he was witness to human activity destroying the primal natural world, even though that world was seemingly *indurate*.

Furthermore, the imagined giants and heavenly auras in this shard of poetry are part of the basis for Cole's real work—those searing, intensely right, forever relevant landscape oils on canvas of the very land we still live in. It is here that I enter the conversation, and I do so as Cole did, as an artist who loves the powerful, vulnerable Catskills and Hudson River Valley.

What follows is one artist's view not merely of the land, but of land observed—the landscape—and not just the landscape of wilderness but of North America and its matrixed culture the way J.B. Jackson made salient half a century ago. And through this kind of landscape we might see ourselves, and see what role an artist and photographer can have in observing and making fervent and real our latest, recurring environmental predicament.

I use Thomas Cole's words as section headings to alert the reader of transitions, like chimes every quarter hour. I'm going to make it personal.

### **...an almost illimitable subject—American Scenery**

The land.

I think of director John Ford's *Grapes of Wrath* (1940) with its sand-torn farms and remember Quentin Tarantino saying how much he hated Ford for his racism and so I think of *Django Unchained* and an alternate tortured American landscape. I picture Ansel Adams and all those impressive saccharine pretty-picture calendars and his reliance on exposure meter precision and remember also his big optimism, and his influence on Aaron Siskind who made those stark Abstract Expressionist black and white photographs of rocks. I think of Carleton Watkins making mammoth plate landscape photographs years before the legendary Timothy O'Sullivan, and of good old iconic Yosemite itself. And then I also imagine Alex Honnold free climbing El Capitan last year, no ropes, just the granite under his feet and weird determination, National Geographic and its cameras hovering.

Everything isn't what it was, and isn't what it is, but one thing surely leads to another.

Nowadays, people must negotiate a traffic jam to get a view of Bridal Veil Falls where I took one simple ecstatic medium format color transparency in the mid-20th Century as a little boy, awed to the point of being dumbstruck. That was, and is, my punctum.

There are remote sensing cameras on Mars that shoot and shoot, and then someone at NASA (in Texas or Boston or who knows where) merges the images together. Singular landscapes, as primal as the pioneer daguerreotype panorama by Frederick Langenheim at Niagara in 1845. But on Mars, without a human

being pointing the camera, this eye roving and snapping away at whatever was available, for the first time ever.

When I first saw those images all I could think was that I had to do the same. On planet Earth. And then I did, in the Pine Bush wasteland near Albany, teeming with ticks. And I continue to compile large images out of smaller ones, the gaps and jagged edges showing. Is the result about seeing, as I believe when I am working, or is it finally about the physical facts of the land, the topography, the Martian landscape of reconfigured dunes in Upstate New York?

The Pine Bush? It's an enigma, changing over a century from its original pitch pine and lupine ecosystem into a more common one of mixed hardwoods. But certain people have deigned this inappropriate, and are burning, bulldozing, and reconfiguring this patchwork of natural habitats to nudge it backwards. Sometimes I feel I'm racing against time to capture what I consider to be the real Pine Bush in its pitched battle. God seems to have no role here.

What would Thomas Cole have done?

What would Cole say to the reforestation of most of the Northeast? How do we understand that Nature in our region is steadily re-invigorated in the last century, and that Cole might have helped us wake to our supporting role? Not with his poetry, obscure and obscurant, but with his complex, layered vision of a sublime on the brink? We cannot for a minute miss the chain of influence from Cole to a score of great painters celebrating landscape, creating a trove of visual proofs of how so many people wanted real empyrean efflorescence in their parlors.

### **...an inseparable connection between the beautiful and the good**

How in fact do we assess the craggy excuse for a crippled tree that a young Thomas Cole coolly sketched in 1823 as part of his new art? I would start by thinking that we simply look and love what he saw: a primal, rich, imperfect and therefore quite suitable world of trees and clouds and light, and space above all, between and around things, and everything. He makes it easy to reconsider the later paintings of Frederic Church, who tipped into painterly effects, and to shrug off the gorgeous, ridiculous exaggerations of Albert Bierstadt, who willfully made the Rockies into craggy Alps even though his own artistic roots were deep into descriptive wet plate photography, having made hundreds of cunning—and accurate—stereo photographs in New England before the Civil War.

Here we might turn to Albert's brother Charles, who made a full blown career of photography, coating his own pieces of glass with collodion and counting out his exposures under his breath: New Bedford, the Flume, Saratoga Springs. He was there, in the mountains, drinking the water. Follow him from Niagara west to Yosemite, where he mimicked Watkins and also complicated his own views, sometimes avoiding that big gesture, finding jumbles of downed trees or shim-



mering reflections in irregular pools. Here was a vision that mashed together the big sublime with the resistant nuance of ordinary detail.

What about New Jersey painter George Inness and his insistence on subtlety at the expense of drama, much like photographer Adin Styles and his matter-of-fact 1860s delicacies of Vermont and the Adirondacks? Or move a century later to snapshots from a book that moved me as a child, *On the Loose*, by Terry and Renny Russell, a counter-culture journal of discovery in the wilderness? Here, suddenly, in a diary-like way, it really gets personal, this experience of being in nature, and the photographs, just crude snapshots of nature, preside as leverage into that experience, not as something self-sufficient.

What are we meant to do with such moving places, and with such compelling images, shorn of extravagance? Where is the artist's eye when the vision comes from the heart? Clearly it worked. It helped make me a photographer. I am only the sum of my influences, twisted a very few turns.

The landscape, the visible scenery in any picture, painted or photographed, has usually meant a dramatic visual high, an appreciation of the profound. Some like Cole once pointed to God, while others (then and later) used the B word—unapproachable and dangerously moving Beauty, like a crepuscular Durrellian breeze off the waters along the Hudson, or some unwritten imagined sighs along the east coast of Sri Lanka, the waters dank and warm. It's all the same. And it is all good.

Cole blurred the notions of God and Beauty, probably on purpose, in two parallel early essays (from 1836 and 1841) where he quotes English writer Charles Lamb from a verse called "Living without God."

*They wander "loose about," they nothing see,  
Themselves except, and creatures like themselves,  
Short-liv'd, short-sighted, impotent to save.*

Lamb continues, in the original, "Destruction cometh...like a dream of murder in the night." Cole felt that imminent demise. As John Muir concurred sixty years later, "Civilized people are still very nearly savage."

And I am guilty! Savage and selfish. A man of molecules. Me, whose first pictures as a boy photographer were ebullient Kodachromes of nature in all its sparkle, intimate and grandiose. Now, a half century later, I can't lift my camera for a raging sunset or a flower bejeweled with dew. I still look and gush, but a photograph would be a waste, a false claim to beauty. I want something else. This does not worry me.

**another generation will behold spots, now rife with beauty, desecrated by what is called improvement**

Beauty? Are we talking beauty to the eye, and if so, is it a formal beauty we can ascribe to an artist, or is it the beauty that was there in the first place that some striving artist made an attempt to assess and replicate, fortify and conjure? Or is it a notion associated with something penetrating, an effect that remains attached to an idea, like the wilderness under attack and yet still the object of adoration? Or if we refuse to assay what “beauty” actually is (W. Eugene Smith once quoted Albert Schweitzer quipping, “Philosophy is for men with full bellies”), can we at least say we know it when we see it?

No. We cannot.

There was a time when the wilderness—disheveled, uncouth, raw—was repulsive. That’s one reason Thoreau was so disruptive and radical, living at Walden Pond “to get the whole and genuine meanness of it.” Nature was once at its pinnacle as a Garden—Eden included. Cole, well before the Transcendentalist Thoreau, was one of a growing hoard of Romantics who directly saw God in Nature, and therefore Beauty in Nature. God and Beauty were closest when they were at their most sublime and unimpeded. Unfiltered, untouched.

But what about art? Art, for the Romantics, was a way to take the unwieldy and make it intelligible and sensible without cutting it down in size. Beethoven’s final symphonies come to mind (though his late quartets are more to the point, actually). Cole’s paintings, as much as the black and white masterpieces of Ansel Adams a century later or even the more recent snapshots by my parents in their trips along Lake Michigan, succeed not for their disdain for civilization, but for the opposite—their taming of unkempt wilderness. Composition and harmony, pleasing color and ordered depth, selective picturesque tropes, even the hard edges of the frames themselves, rectangular boundaries and precise limitations, made these visions safe, conservative, contained.

**...an unfailing fountain of intellectual enjoyment, where all may drink**

We can say if we like, in a single breath: Nature trumps Art. Cole, the artist, implied as much. Maybe he would insist, if he were here, that art for him was an inevitable outcome of nature. He described without restraint the impact of being in nature. I think he would have liked photography had he tried it.

Experiencing first hand the intrinsically aesthetic wilderness is what then bore the spiritual fervor that mattered. Photographing and painting the wilderness is not a substitute for entering the wilds. In fact, a photograph of something pristine is a violation of its raw essence because that’s what art does. It undermines the basically sloppy dada mess of nature. It’s disruptive and civilizing. It’s wrong.

And that's exactly why landscape art is so crucial. The experience within a Seneca Ray Stoddard photograph of the Adirondacks is not the experience of canoeing or hiking there. Some would say it's something higher—art always privileging itself—but let's at least admit it's something different. Radically so. Intellectually so.

That word intellectual is a curious one for Cole. It means thinking rather than feeling the woods and rivers and clouds that converge into a single scene. But it makes sense. I get this guy. You're out there, and you do get carried away and gush. But there is a more constant enjoyment that comes from comprehension and assessment.

I have to really ask myself, as an artist, am I cognitive or am I emotional when I take (or make) a photograph of the land? At first, I'm not sure. I would like to say both and slip out of the problem, but the more I consider the more I know it's all a brain and eyes thing. When I'm photographing, that is.

To be clear, I might at first be moved (compelled, taken, distracted) enough to grab my camera and start walking or looking at the ground glass—and maybe that's the real zenith of the event, the compulsion and the clarity. But when I stop to grunt and stare and frame the image further, tilting the lens to push something out of focus, swiveling on the ball head, holding my breath when I lift the dark slide from the lens to “take” the photograph itself, I am responding to intellectual, analytical prods. I am ecstatic, but I know that I am.

### **...exclaiming against the apathy**

The dynamic between an artist and the natural world is personal. I cannot consider making a sunset photograph not because it has been made by others a billion times before. It is because I have done it once before.

Art is not a natural process. Yet it is trapped by its process. I photograph, and the subject determines the boundaries of what I can photograph. And then it is done. There is no going back, though there is going forward. I can change the photograph. As I mutate the original I move every so slightly out of what can fairly be called a landscape. A landscape, as art, has a relationship to the landscape, as land, and the more you subvert that relationship the more you reject the land. I'm okay with that. Edward Weston gradually pulled his camera back from oversized views of peppers to formal evocations of the larger world, the dunes and rocks of coastal California. He visited Yosemite with Adams, and he no doubt admired Watkins. The mountains there did seem to be a mecca for the purist mentality for a hundred years. But Weston did not make glorifying landscapes. For me, Weston is still an artist above all, compromised in life but uncompromising in his work. For him, the land and the landscape really did transcend mere occupation in space and time, and it was the

transposition into a photograph that was the true test of the land.

### **...toiling to produce more toil**

It does come down to what matters in your own existence.

Do we work and make a life that demands ever more from us? Do we need to wander off the road into the woods, toward an unexpected break in the trees where we steady ourselves to adjust to the scale of what is beyond? When do we confront the cliché of smelling roses and privet, or even stopping along a muddy ditch or in a place where the trees are too thick to create a break to the valley unseen? To know our place, this place, the present environment around us? To stop writhing and burrowing and striving?

And when does a photographer have the chance to say anything worthwhile again? As we pile images on images of places we've already visited by picture or in fact, the simulacra that are built as evidence are a deceptive and strange parallel world. The difference between the picturesque and the picture, between the map and the territory, and between nature and the naturalistic is the difference between making images and experiencing what to make images of.

I used to carry with me, as a romantic youth, a tattered copy of *Art as Experience* by John Dewey. (Don't worry, I also read *On the Road* and lots of Wallace Stevens and all of Jane Austen) I can't say I ever got Dewey very thoroughly or even finished it (that was long ago), but the spirit of his ideas infected me. In that 1934 book he writes, "It belongs to the very character of the creative mind to reach out and seize any material that stirs it so that the value of that material may be pressed out and become the matter of a new experience."

It becomes then an act leading to an act, not an invention (an object, a work). It about the furtherance of life. The photograph is not the experience. I don't photograph to remember experiences, though the experience of photographing is an experience I crave. This isn't doubletalk.

I don't want to live by proxy, in a pictorial limbo, even if my art seems to threaten that. I still need to trip on some balsam fir roots, smell the bite of frost in the February air, and worry about lightning as thunder rumbles against the exposed quartz gravel cliff. Reductive, humbling, simplistic? Whatever.

The worldly art critic Robert Hughes had a revelation mid-life, admitting out loud, "We are alone," with understandable despair. I agree, and commiserate. Thomas Cole came from a whole different universe of influences, but his substitution of Nature for God (or at least his conflating them) helps prolong his influence two centuries later even as he perpetuates some of the principles behind God: the divine

The worldly art critic Robert Hughes had a revelation mid-life, admitting out loud, “We are alone,” with understandable despair. I agree, and commiserate. Thomas Cole came from a whole different universe of influences, but his substitution of Nature for God (or at least his conflating them) helps prolong his influence two centuries later even as he perpetuates some of the principles behind God: the divine and the sublime.

When we scrutinize feelings as ambiguous and still very real as awe or wonder, it seems we are entering the arena that others might call religious. If we, as artists, can talk about beauty as a quality of the sublime, we have a handle on what makes it matter. Not intellectually, but spiritually. Or for me, intuitively. Or as Dewey would have it, experientially.

And the point of all this is simply to say that these impulses and feelings are bigger than the petty politics and environmental ups and downs that preoccupy us. Not that I’m indifferent to environmental science (my original degree is in plant ecology), and I am truly concerned that whole populations wear facemasks on their commute. I’m not suggesting withdrawal and selfish hedonism, that those of use who can walk in the wilderness should. But my eye is sometimes onto something with a longer waveform. What if God is not in the details, but in a stride bigger than a few lifespans?

Paul (and I mean the apostle Paul) was talking about our worldly limitations when he gave this electricity to his first letter to the Corinthians: “For now we see through a glass darkly.” Really? And Plato, relaying the philosophy of Socrates, tells of the prisoner in the cave being released, “Slowly, his eyes adjust to the light of the sun.” Then, experiencing a new reality in broad daylight, he goes back. “Would he not find in that case, coming suddenly out of the sunlight, that his eyes were filled with darkness?”

And so we are all blind and perceptive in starts.

### **...the wall that shuts us out of the garden is our own ignorance**

Wait, read that again. That is Thomas Cole in 1836: “The wall that shuts us out of the garden is our own ignorance.”

It is the cognizance of the camera that keeps me seeing clearly, within that narrow perimeter, from within the locus of being that is my consciousness. Whatever that is. I’m sure I am saying the obvious, but when days or weeks go by and I haven’t taken that walk or noticed the turn of light on a shard of ice, I clearly need to say the obvious. In a world where there is no free will (read up on it), where there is no sense of individually surviving this planet (see Hank Williams in the closing lines), where it would be easy to thrash and moan, I find myself very much rising above the personal.

And that's where Thomas Cole had it very right. Even as he showed the lone soul at the edge of a sunset drenched utopia, there is the implication of responsibility. He acted on it. He wrote on behalf of the forest. He painted the axe-hewn stump and the indurate cliffs. He understood consequences for nature, and furthermore, he understood and saw and painted the tangible effects of ordinary humans—lots of them—plundering what was actually sublime and by extension, sacrosanct.

### **destroys Nature's beauty without substituting that of Art**

This is the end, and you want a conclusion. But this is an open text, and it is written to let you enact the essence of being a reader in our times, as Roland Barthes so well expressed in his book, *La mort de l'auteur*. By the time you read this, it is not my codex, it is yours. Anticipating this, I've left fissures not of logic but of presentation. These gaps are the entry points. What might seem like sloppiness has been a lot of work. But it remains a text, an essay much like Cole's. It is not illustrated on Instagram. You can't google what to do next.

There is a devastating conundrum I have faced time and again—how to remain relevant. And my answer, time and again, is to do what is closest to me and which lacks, as much as possible (and this is difficult) artifice. The indirect contrivances that others, especially in academia, embrace as a worthy substitution to reality I find thin and frivolous—it's a lot of steam in a sauna. All I want to do is negotiate to the window and wipe the glass to see the landscape outside.

And there I find myself looking out the window, positioning myself so the view is emphatic. This is the artist in me as a photographer. There is a tree to one side, a road without a shoulder turning quickly behind the chicory, a bird, I think, chattering there, the sky with little to say in its gray glare. And in this nook, from the pressing coals behind, my nose against the glass, I am witness to the new sublime. Later I will stop the car and open the trunk and pull out the French tripod and attach the Vermont-made wooden view camera with its German lens and Japanese shutter. The film, only black and white these days, hails from England. What can one person do? Maybe this: substitute that of art. Counter the loss of one beauty with the creation of another. This isn't enough, for sure, but it is something, and it's what I offer, while I'm here, one slow exposure at a time.

*No matter how I struggle and strive, I'll never get out of this world alive.*

In the grey dusk, you see, are some finely spun weeds along the road, the wilderness at some kind of perimeter, me on one side, me not on the other. The landscape there, that beautiful inverted untamed asymmetrical mysterious strangeness on the acid-etched ground glass under a black cloth, becomes the shadow in the cave, circles of confusion slightly out of focus, seen through a kind of purified obsidian. And the heart quickens. Which is pretty good for a bunch of atoms.

**William Jaeger** is a photographer and writer who has lived for over thirty years in the Catskills and Upper Hudson River Valley. He is originally from Michigan, where he studied plant ecology at Michigan Technological University along Lake Superior. He later pursued photography at Rochester Institute of Technology. Jaeger has been teaching photography and art criticism at the University at Albany for over two decades, and currently also writes art reviews for the Times Union. Ongoing creative projects include photographing along the Erie Canal route and throughout Albany's Pine Bush, as well as writing short fiction.

# POEMS



# Featured Poets:

**Sara Pruiksmá** grew up in the countryside of Coxsackie-Athens, NY. Inspired by her bucolic upbringing, she resides nearby in Albany county, close to the Hudson River. Pruiksmá graduated from Columbia-Greene Community College (2005, AA), Alfred University School of Art and Design (2007, BFA) and from the University at Albany in 2011 with her Master's in Fine Arts. In addition to her visual studio practice, Pruiksmá revisits her early passion of writing to further her creative voice.

**Justin Nobel** writes on issues of science and the environment for magazines and literary journals such as *Rolling Stone*, *Audubon*, *Orion*, *Tin House*, *Oxford American* and *Virginia Quarterly Review*. His work has been published in *Best American Science and Nature Writing 2014* and *Best American Travel Writing 2011*, and 2016. Justin was born in New York City, grew up in suburbs north of the city, and later received a dual masters degree in earth and environmental science and journalism from Columbia University. He has worked with newspapers in California and the Canadian Arctic, and presently lives in Germantown, New York with his partner Karen, a dressmaker.

**Herbert Nichols** is from and currently resides in Hudson, NY. He attended Columbia Green Community College and this is his first published writing

# A Note to Those Sighted *by a Loving Daughter*

by Sara Pruiksma

Let us not gain tired of the rolling hills, grainy fields and lavender mountains, the simplicity of an emerald, dewy leaf, or the familiar tumble of the Hudson over the shoreline's rubble.

Let us not gain tired of seeing what is so splendid.

Look with a child's wonder and the landscape will reward you.

Practice patience and you will not wait.

As forever changing is our landscape, so are we.

It will not remain the same, not the storefronts or homes,  
the sidewalks or streams...

Not the trampled grasses or hillsides you've grown too comfortable with to give notice.

Should the landscape fade, like a road consumed by fog,  
become a relentless, unforgiving haze...

Could you recite from within your mind's eye the mountains' curvature?

Their subtle changes in hue as the sundial shadow turns, warm greys, to purples to blue? Could you recall the cascade of light over each crest of a far-off range, or the dappled shadows cast under billowing clouds?

Should the redness of a tulip become a recollection of the past

The brilliant green of your lawn become an assumption

Should the fog fade your once vivid countryside, irreversibly;

May the sound of whipping wind color your memory

May the smell of your lawn, freshly trimmed,

paint how lovely your pasture truly is

May you draw from the richness of touch

Through the years the landscape will change,

like the planes of our loved one's faces.

May you not gain tired of seeing what is so splendid.

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# Shed a Tear for the American Landscape

by Justin Nobel

Shed a tear for West Virginia,  
her hills and hollers,  
huckleberries and black bears,

Where in 1742, German-born explorer  
John Peter Salley  
officially recorded the first coal seam.

By 1810, Wheeling residents used coal to heat their homes,  
1811, the first Ohio River steamboat burned coal,  
And from 1900 to 1925, nearly all US energy came from coal.

It wasn't until the 1990s, that corporations began  
regularly blowing up mountains to mine the fuel,  
which still generates 30 percent of America's electricity.

West Virginia is a peripheral region, says Shirley Stewart Burns  
in her book, *Bringing Down the Mountains*,  
“Like a colony, the periphery supplies raw materials...so that the core can benefit.”

Shed a tear for Nevada,  
her basins and ranges,  
sagebrush and bighorn sheep,

Where from 1951 to 1992 the US government  
detonated 928 nuclear devices, at a sacred spot in the desert,  
where the Western Shoshone people once hunted, and danced.

Nevada,  
which according to the Shoshone, who cite the 1863 Treaty of Ruby Valley,  
is not really Nevada,

But a vast land called Newe Sogobia,  
beneath which flows a river of radioactive water, contaminated from the test sites,  
headed southwest, at a rate of up to 18 feet a year.

“My suggestion is we pray,” says Chief Johnnie Bobb,  
who each autumn leads a group,  
to the gun-guarded gates.

Shed a tear for Louisiana,  
her marshes and bayous,  
pelicans and alligators,

Where, since the mid-1930s, more than 2,000 square miles of land  
has been lost,  
Because dikes along the Mississippi, shoot sediment straight out to sea,  
And oil and gas canals have spliced open the marshes, and let the ocean in.

Meanwhile, up her maiden river,  
A section of land so sick it has been named: Cancer Alley  
Here are communities, vibrant and colorful, founded by freed slaves

Now being evicted by corporations,  
looking to build massive petrochemical plants,  
that make the plastics which make the products, that we all use.

“The crowd gets smaller, you get defeated,” says Chauna Banks,  
councilwoman in the capitol city Baton Rouge, and fighting back,  
But she could be anyone, anywhere, across the American land, who still sheds  
tears,

“We will not accept  
these conditions,”  
she says (we all say)

“It is a willingness to declare  
that in my lifetime,  
this is going to end.”

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# Mayflower to May Tricks

by Herbert Nichols

Fathers found, May sons sow ground,  
Flowers abound, latter Aprils drown.  
A Saga of how the West was won,  
Trails tear through woven sun.  
Chairs a key as bulls stop running,  
Sitting a patch of Chi trapped cunning.  
Great plains now soiled with concrete,  
Jungles of order brought a chaotic defeat.  
Up rooted and looted, nature transmutes,  
Free flowing vibrations captured to classically compute.  
Wild into tame, conscious into lame,  
Individuals into herd, common core in brain.  
Sugar senses assaulted with cane,  
Bypass conditioning, Pavlov, bringer of rain.  
Drool apt tool, pigeons turned stool,  
Homing disrupted for few men's rule.  
Pinecones close as floor rides to chair,  
Qualia dampens as shining turns stare.  
Flowers of life's green yolked by hams,  
Walls amass, dividing Sam from I am.  
Rabbits bring treats as springtime ticks,  
April's fools roll over to May's tricks.

Man turns Machine, Machine turns Man,  
Arrow of Time, Entropy, Hourglass, Sand.  
Bush Backpack Oxygen, after trees lack,  
Sam or I, the last tree fracked.  
Hug and Die, Comply and Prize,  
New Atlantis built, Sod Ohms rise.  
Broadcasts turn from Land of the Braves,  
Networked into the home of the Craves.  
Addresses become fixed yet never owned.  
Reaping of sown gravitate to throne.  
Proletariats grown, Eyes weave sewn.

Grok turns groan as minds turn drone.  
Downhill flow as Jack and Jill know,  
Olympus waste for the pigs and crow.  
Until animal's atlas, maze run with stealth,  
Nature diminishes for false Nations of Wealth.  
Trees Stand prisoners around local towns,  
Pedestrians to view, who so few See frown.  
Foresight to appease, immediate in demand,  
Cabled coliseums claws cerebrals command.  
Man that once stood to stand,  
Sovereign kings on land, lending hand,

Now bow alone to unseen throne,  
Groves of Cedar, turned Bohemian Bones.  
The Garden of Eden, subsiding waters dry,  
Titans, a goblet deluge of past stands desolate by.  
Mortal men turn the state savage to induce fear,  
The past returns reshaped, never really departing here.  
Ate teen ate teen hungry lands,  
Milk for babes, meat for men, glass in sand.  
Lives, days waving hand, hello, good by rides  
Ghosts passing through suns rising tides.  
Pandora idles in hands, confused lived tame.  
Kindling Prometheus waves, band aids to fan flame.  
Until chair chained, zoos bolt the plan.  
May tricks pluck the eyes of peering man.  
Max plank mutants last stand,  
Test la tee doe, ships sinking band.  
Meh deuced to solitude, destined pillar of salt,  
Fear built walls, keeping aliens halt.  
Same ole Plan, as Willies Lynch by sin and drone,  
48 hour fix, as Titantics build a Berg alone.  
Credit rates castaways, systems anew  
Spirits turned flesh turned numbers on queue.

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